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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that it can be helpful to accept and comment upon preliminary drafts of student papers, as well as the "final" version that will be graded. Comments on preliminary drafts should focus on what seem to be the most fundamental matters, leaving others (including grading) for later drafts. Appropriate types of concerns and comments at each stage of the process are discussed, as are advantages and disadvantages of the approach as a whole. (AA)

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THE DRAFTING PROCESS AND THE MARKING OF STUDENT PAPERS

W. U. McDonald

Although the advanced title for my talk was "The Composing Process and the Marking of Student Papers," a more accurate title would be "The Drafting Process and the Marking of Student Papers." For I want to focus on one segment of that composing process, a segment which, despite all our talk in professional meetings, journals and textbooks in recent years about the composing process, has received very little attention, especially as it impinges on what papers we mark and how we mark them. Our main focus seems to be on the prewriting phase or on the final product, with little or no attention to the equally important preliminary drafts that the student writes. In fact, I get the impression that a great many universities, perhaps most, still rely heavily on the impromptu and still allow students to submit only one version, the graded one, of other papers.

So perhaps a few words are in order here about the appropriateness of accepting and commenting on preliminary drafts as well as on the version to be graded. If our concern in freshman composition is with helping students learn to write, and if this involves showing them what the entire composing process is like, and if we believe that revisions are a normal part of that process, then it seems obvious that we are obliged to allow them to submit several drafts to which we are obliged to respond. (This, by the way, is what many of us have been doing for several years at the University of Toledo in both the beginning and second-quarter composition courses.) At this point I can see the objection being raised that to do this is to write the papers for the students. But, as I will try to show later, it does not necessarily follow that commenting on a draft amounts to

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rewriting it. That depends on how it is commented on. But even if such were the case, this is no more than we do for our colleagues. I have read and commented on two drafts of a paper a colleague is writing--on matters like transition, organization and unity, - or the lack thereof. This kind of thing happens every day, and, as you know, editors of journals do not ask for testimonials that submitted articles were prepared without assistance or criticism. I don't see why a freshman isn't entitled to comparable assistance. And I do not think the familiar argument that we know how to write and our students don't, should carry much weight. After all, they know something about writing too, and in our courses we are simply trying to help them write better, as we try to help our colleagues. In both instances, in fact, we are serving as a tryout audience--indicating points not clear to us, logical connections not made, evidence that seems inadequate, etc. Moreover, if we have ever explored how in fact we compose, we have all discovered, I suspect, that having written a number of articles does not necessarily mean that we find it any easier to get started or that we don't need criticism by someone else as we go about working toward the final version.

If you will assume with me, then, that a student may properly be allowed to submit for our comment preliminary drafts of a paper, I would like to discuss briefly some ways that we as instructors may appropriately respond to them. I will assume that the usual number of such drafts is two.

What then do we do with the first draft we receive? We read it through to ascertain whether it has one direction or several, mentally prepared to accept the fact that the student may have discovered his real direction only by the time he gets to the end of it. In a

beginning course at least, we should do this without feeling that somehow the student is being negligent in failing to adequately think through a subject before writing that draft. There may be quite legitimate reasons why he hasn't. And sooner or later he will have to make up for this failure--we all do--or the final version will suffer. If accepting such a preliminary draft means reading it once before we comment, then so be it (we can read pretty rapidly if we aren't commenting). If the student has found his real direction only near the end, we can focus our remarks on that part, largely ignoring what has preceded. After all, there's no need to comment on paragraphs that may well be irrelevant to what he is going to do in the next draft. Instead, we can raise questions to help him see the possibilities of the direction he has found or clarify matters that he must deal with now that he has found his direction.

If, however, the draft has a focus, even a vague one, we can concentrate on other matters that we consider to be "chronologically" of first importance. My own first concerns are the content, the clarity, and the basic coherence of the whole. Thus I would raise questions about the adequacy, inadequacy or relevance of the content, about the clarity of paragraphs, and about connections between paragraphs--questions in short, related to whether the student has sufficiently thought through his topic to see what all he has to say, whether readers can find their way from one part to another and know at a given point where they are in relation to the whole, whether sentences within paragraphs are clear and make sense. Unless these matters have been dealt with in a reasonably satisfactory way, I would not worry at this point about the most <u>effective</u> transition

or the smoothest phrasing, only about the presence of essential transition, the basic clarity of the sentences.

And I would give little or no attention to points of usage or mechanics or grammar unless they constituted obstacles to communication. I wouldn't worry, for example, about "comma splices," except in a stentence, say, where the structure leads me to read past the mark into the next clause because there is no semicolon; nor would I mark nonagreements that did not cause puzzlement or misspellings that did not create other words (except/accept, for example). Because if the content is inadequate, if the order of the parts must be rearranged significantly in the next draft, if paragraphs must be redeveloped for simple logic and clarity--then many sentences are likely to be changed or deleted anyway, and there seems to be no point in having a student correct dozens of usage errors in sentences that are likely to disappear before the next draft. In fact, to identify them on the pages of a student's paper at this stage, when they are likely to be numerous, can give the student an impression of their importance that is all out of proportion at this point in the process. Moreover, if we believe the composition course should attempt to mirror at least to some extent the entire composing process, then we can probably all agree that it is not spelling or punctuation or most grammatical usages that we first worry about when preparing a first or maybe even a second draft.

With the "usual" second draft, while still giving attention first to the adequacy and relevance of the content and to the organization and coherence of the paper and of its parts, I would give more consideration to other matters, especially to sentence structure--for

example, appropriate subordination--and to usage problems beyond those that affect basic communication. But how much consideration would depend on the quality of the content, organization, coherence, and clarity of that version.

In this discussion I have been illustrating my own scale of concerns and talking in terms of "archetypal" drafts which no actual draft may precisely conform to. Moreover, in courses after the beginning one, the first draft may never be as unfocused as I've been assuming here that it would be. The important point is that as we comment on successive versions we should do so within a scale of concerns that is based on what we know of the composing process while realizing that particular papers will vary from the "archetypes" we have assumed. This phased procedure for responding to different drafts reflects what we have long recognized: that writers--including ourselves--cannot pay attention to everything successfully at one time. If they revise a single draft again and again, they are in effect preparing several, although they are working on a single set of manuscript sheets. (We have sometimes tried to acknowledge this fact in the past, I believe, by having students concentrate on one thing in a particular paper and then grading it primarily on that one thing--a practice I disapprove of, by the way, because I think in grading we should always consider the paper as a whole.) In responding to preliminary drafts, then, I believe we should assume that the student can usefully pay attention to only a limited number of things at a given time, and we should encourage him to deal first with what seem to us the most fundamental matters, leaving others for successive drafts.

In the graded version, however, we can still comment on everything, including matters (like sentence effectiveness and the best choice among several possible words) that we had ignored in the drafts--in short, on all the things we have always commented on in a finished paper. If it is objected that such a procedure isn't fair, then I would respond that it is no more unfair than what we have done when marking only one version, the graded one; then, presumably, we took into account a variety of elements and probably commented only on those that most influenced our decision as to the grade. Moreover, with the procedure I am suggesting, we must of course explain to the students the rationale for the shifting emphasis in our comments, indicate what elements we will generally give most attention to in what draft, and prepare them for the fact that in evaluating the final version, we will consider the paper as a whole. At Toledo we haven't found that this drafting approach creates special problems. Rather it seems to allow us to deal more successfully with a problem that comes up from time to time in Freshman Composition courses--the idea that by changing a few things the instructor has specifically identified on a paper, the student can automatically make it immensely better and automatically raise the grade. Here, as he begins to see the complexity of the writing process, as he begins to understand that in a single draft he can only deal with some of the problems of the paper, but with each draft may improve it, he will have less sense of being misled or cheated when his final version does not wind up with an "A" grade.

To sum up, the first fundamental way that the "drafting process" impinges upon--or ought to impinge upon--our marking of papers is this:

we have to decide what is of first and of lesser importance to us--what is our scale of concerns--as the student attempts a first and then a second draft. And we have to keep these concerns in mind as we respond to these drafts, even as we keep in mind the multiplicity of patterns the composing process may take. For we are trying to prod the student to improve toward the goal of writing the most effective paper he can on the topic.

The other fundamental consequence that seems to me to follow from thus incorporating the drafting process in a composition course is that the function and mode of our comments will be, or should be, different from when we simply grade a supposedly finished paper. They are intended to promote reconsideration, not offer a judgment or justify an A or C or D or F. They are the responses of a writing consultant or editor or colleague--of a teacher--from whom criticism and suggestions have been sought. For me this means that they most often take the form of questions--not answers, not directives--relating to those elements of a piece of writing that I consider need attention in each of successive preliminary drafts, questions that identify or point toward problems I encountered as a reader of the paper. By way of illustration let me give you some generalized examples.

First as to marginal comments. Beside a paragraph opening which has left me wondering about the connection between that paragraph and the preceding one--either because the student failed to provide transition or because there was no relationship--I might write womething to this effect: "How does this idea (I would specify) relate to the idea (specified) of the preceding paragraph, where you said

thus and so?" or at the end of a first draft in which it appeared to me the student had finally found his point of attack in the last paragraph, I might make a comment such as this: "Isn't this your real concern in this paper? At least what you say"--and I would probably specify it--"makes be believe so. If so, see which if any of the preceding paragraphs are relevant or whether you need to start from here." Or by a sentence with structural difficulties I might comment--after first circling the relevant structural elements in it: "Is this phrase intended to modify thus and so or thus and so?" The intent is to raise some questions the students should ask about the papers they are writing. That's why not only my rhetorical comments but most of my usage comments on preliminary drafts take the form of questions. Often merely to label a verb error or an agreement error as such misses the point--which is to help a student see that usage problems can interfere with the reader's comprehension of what he has written and thus weaken the effectiveness of his paper.

If the marginal comments on preliminary drafts might most often take the form of questions, so also might much of the general or summing-up comment. It will, of course, include statements acknowledging what has been done well and perhaps identifying major problems and giving suggestions for dealing with them. But on preliminary drafts my comment on these problems and on possible solutions <u>usually</u> takes the form of questions: "What basically are you trying to do in the paper?" "Is there some connection between the first 7 paragraphs and the last 5? If so, this isn't clear." As in marginal comments, I may of course phrase these more specifically: "Did you intend to contrast the idea of thus and so in the first half of the

paper with the idea of thus and so in the last half? If so, to what purpose?" "Are you comparing similar things--for example, the ideas in paragraphs 2 and 3 with those in paragraphs 4 and 5?" Questions can point the student toward the sources of some difficulties for me as reader without necessarily telling him what he ought to do with the paper, without suggesting, for example, that he ought to have a comparison and contrast. Instead they ask him to reconsider something he has done that gave me trouble, and this, as I have said, is a fundamental reason for our dealing with preliminary drafts: to ask the student to rethink and reconsider what he is doing in the light of an audience's response.

The benefits of proceeding in this fashion are obvious I think. They help the student see that with each stage, each draft, questions arise that need to be pondered and dealt with in the next one, and that this is a part of the normal process of composition. (To reinforce this point, incidentally, we can bring to class our own drafts and show him just how much they had to be worked over, often with the help of our colleagues.) Such an approach can, I believe, help him to look at his own writing more objectively and learn to revise it more effectively on his own than when he is simply given a grade on a so-called finished paper--even if he is urged to revise. There is a benefit for <u>us</u> also: before we begin a marking procedure like this, we have to get our own compositional and pedagogical house in order: we have to look at the way <u>we</u> go about writing papers, and we have to think about what elements of writing need to be dealt with first in that process. And we have to think about how best to mark papers as a part of our teaching and the student's learning, because otherwise

we cannot phrase comments in ways that will most effectively lead him to reconsider his own writing.

But there are two potential problems that this approach makes us face up to. One is that we do have to avoid writing the paper for the student. I have tried to suggest how we can do this by relying heavily on questions that direct him to reconsider certain aspects of a paper and by giving him a variety of alternatives to consider. The other problem--or blessing, depending upon your point ov view--is that we may well find that our "psychological" approach to marking papers undergoes a change if we try this method seriously. I now read not to judge, but to identify problems and possibilities, that is, not in terms of what has been done, but of what needs to be done, what can be done. This may inadequately suggest a change which has turned out to be a fundamental one for me, so fundamental that when I get to the version that's to be graded, it's very difficult to make the shift: I still want to raise questions, suggest possibilities; I don't want to give a grade, but of course I have to. Moreover, it is now much more difficult to grade the final version "objectively"--that is, on its own merits alone--if one ever <u>can</u> do that. Thus this way of marking compositions, which I have used for almost ten years now, has been at once a liberating and a frustrating experience, one that has prompted me elsewhere to plead for the use of brief written evaluations rather than final grades in composition courses.

But whatever the personal depression, it is more than compensated for by the benefits. For this approach can be, I believe, not merely a medium for conveying to the student a judgment of his finished product, but also a positive instrument for helping him learn what writing is and how to do it better.